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Chapter Eight

Judith Butler

Jelke Boesten

Biographical Details

Judith Butler (1956 -) was born in Cleveland, Ohio, to parents of Hungarian and Russian Jewish descent. She attended Hebrew School, where, as punishment for being ‘too talkative’ at age 14, she engaged in private classes in Jewish ethics at the synagogue. On her own account, Butler’s interest in philosophy and ethics stems from this period and forms the beginning of an ongoing career in the fields of queer and gender theory, philosophy, literary theory and arguably, or perhaps increasingly, political theory.¹ Her latest work returns to those early years with a defence of nonviolence and a critique of state violence – particularly of Israel’s use of violence – grounded in Jewish ethics. But before she published *Parting Ways* in 2012, she published eleven single-authored books, six co-authored works, two edited volumes and a range of chapters, articles and interviews – an as yet unfinished *oeuvre* of great diversity within critical social and political theory.

Butler received her BA (1978) and PhD (1984) in philosophy from Yale University on the reception of the philosopher G.W.F. Hegel in France, which formed the basis of her first book, *Subjects of Desire: Hegelian Reflections in Twentieth-Century France* (1987). Since then she has taught at a range of US and international universities, and currently holds the Maxine Elliot Chair in Rhetoric and Comparative Literature at the University of California, Berkeley. Butler has won many prizes, visiting professorships, honorary degrees, and awards, amongst which recently (2009-2013) was the Andrew Mellon Award, which allowed her to work on a critical theory program at Berkeley.

Butler gained popular acclaim, and even fame (a rare feat for a professor of philosophy – bar Žižek) for her work on gender: for troubling it, untying, deconstructing,

denaturalizing and undoing gender. Her book, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), responded to the identity politics of the 1970s and 1980s, in which those who felt marginalised by society claimed a group identity from which to fight for their rights as citizens – as feminism did through a politics of ‘sisterhood’ and even later with a focus on intersectionality and multiple cross-cutting markers of identity and inequality. The gay liberation movement and the civil rights movements also relied on identity politics as the grounds for collective action.² *Gender Trouble*, and many of Butler’s writings that came after that (especially *Bodies that Matter* from 1993 and *Undoing Gender* from 2004), unsettle our common understandings of what gender, sex and desire might mean. Butler’s analysis denies a direct or natural link between (biological) sex and gender, and thereby undermines the idea that there is such a thing as a collective identity based on gender or sexuality. Butler’s troubling of gender as a category aimed to destabilise gender identities as in any way given, or even resulting from, biological sex. Rather, Butler sustained, gender is a performance that responds to the expectations and norms of society. *Gender Trouble* was not only theoretically innovative and important, but had very concrete political consequences in that it inspired and legitimized an ‘anti-identarian turn of queer politics’.³ Indeed Butler became an icon of radical feminism, queer studies and queer politics, and a basher of anything perceived as ‘common sense’ about gender and sexuality.

Butler’s work is concerned with the philosophy of *how we become*, considering the social restrictions that govern our imagination, and indeed our consciousness. Thus, while sexual politics might seem far removed from Hegelian and Continental nineteenth- and twentieth-century philosophy, Butler’s main sources of analysis were not only Hegel, but also Friedrich Nietzsche, Walter Benjamin and Hannah Arendt, and French and German existentialism. In addition, she drew on psychoanalysis (Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida), feminist thinkers such as Simone de Beauvoir, Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray

and Monique Wittig, and of course the sociologist Michel Foucault. In practice, her work on subject formation is very much grounded in thinking about sex, sexuality and gender, as well as on considering theoretical notions of subjectivity, subversion and power. Butler's more recent work on 'livable life' extends the idea of the constraining power of normative frameworks in the context of gender to grief and violence. In *Undoing Gender* (2004) livable life as a concept is embedded in the experience of gender and sexuality in a heteronormative society. In *Precarious Life*, published in the same year, Butler expanded the question of livability to an analysis of post 9/11 warfare and grief. Her theoretical work and her conceptual journey tie her ethics and her politics together, as most clearly discussed in *Frames of War* (2009). Her politics seeks to minimize the precariousness of life, the always lingering possibility of the subjection to a suspension, or undoing of life. So, while according to some Butler's writings are too far removed from reality (Martha Nussbaum famously ridiculed and dismissed her as the 'professor of parody')⁴ or linguistically too difficult (she won a first prize in 1998 for 'bad writing'), there is a real desire for social justice in her thinking.

More recently, Butler's politics with regard to Zionism and the politics of the state of Israel formed the centre of controversy over her work: when she was offered the Theodor Adorno prize in 2012 for her contribution to critical social theory, a storm of protest emerged because of her – what Gerry Kearns calls – 'geopolitics of identity'. Butler is a staunch critic of Israel, and takes an anti-Zionist position *vis-à-vis* the Israeli state as well as Jewish identity. She partly supports the boycotts, divestments and sanctions movements, and then, in 2012, published *Parting Ways*, a theoretically underpinned defence of a one-state multiple-identities politics. US, German and Israeli Jews who equate anti-Zionism, or even critique of Israel as a state, with anti-Semitism felt that she was not worthy of the Adorno Prize, as a 'self-hating' Jew. But Butler has long defended her right to be critical of the state of Israel,

once responding to the then President of Harvard University, Lawrence Summers, that ‘A criticism of Israel is not the same ... as a challenge to Israel’s existence ... A challenge to the right of Israel to exist can be construed as a challenge to the existence of the Jewish people only if one believes that Israel alone keeps the Jewish people alive or that all Jews invest their sense of perpetuity in the state of Israel in its current or traditional forms’.⁵ Butler’s politics, then, is a politics of ethical living and non-violence in the face of different levels of normative, ethical and state violence and always seems to propose a radical departure from what some persistently construct as common sense.

Theorizing Violence

In her 2004 book *Undoing Gender*, Butler elaborates on her ideas around subject formation in relation to the normative frameworks that guide our lives. She builds on a Foucaultian biopolitical view in order to argue that rules, regulations and norms set out the meanings and limits of physical and social life. Hence norms are enabling, they provide context and regulate our interdependency, they make subject formation intelligible, but they also restrict the possibilities of how life can be lived. Butler refers to the ‘norms and conventions that permit people to breathe, to desire, to love and to live, and those norms and conventions that restrict or eviscerate the conditions of life itself. Sometimes norms function both ways at once, and sometimes they function one way for a given group and another way for another group’.⁶ Norms are fields of power, and they provide the cultural frameworks in which we *become*; through the productive power of repetitive performance, norms provide the implicit standard for *normalisation*, i.e. the process whereby the norm ‘is acted out in social practice and re-idealized and reinstituted in and through the daily social rituals of bodily life’.⁷ Some norms are of course set in law, and a discussion of law and accountability before the law is Butler’s concern in *Giving an Account of Oneself*, as well as in her work on understanding precarity and war. Many laws that govern gender relations – inheritance law,

marriage, paternity etc. – are actually subject-forming, they set the limits of what gendered being means. But at the same time, following Foucault, there is a recognition that many norms that inform our subject formation are not written into law, but rather, are produced and reproduced, owned and maintained by society at large; norms are reproduced by ‘regulative discourses’.⁸

Thus Butler asks ‘what, given the contemporary order of being, can I be?’⁹ Her questions emerges from thinking about gendered subject formation: how (what mechanisms?) are we pushed into being someone according to pre-existing understandings of what it is to be human? What is a coherent gendered being; what counts as a citizen? But she also asks crucial questions about resistance to the hegemonic order: ‘What happens when I begin to become that for which there is no place within the given regime of truth?’¹⁰

This is the point at which the concept of normative violence becomes relevant. On the one hand, Butler sees violence in the restrictions imposed on being – when norms tell us what we can and cannot do at the most personal and intimate level of life, and we are not ‘allowed’ to become what we might be. But Butler also refers to violence as emerging from that which might happen if one becomes that for which there is no place within a given regime of truth. Those who *become* beyond and outside existing normative frameworks or understandings of truth become unintelligible to wider society, and therefore need to be corrected by that society – or eliminated. In *Undoing Gender*, one of her most accessible books, Butler uses a range of examples to underpin her arguments. One of her main examples concerns the intersexed body, which has long been treated as an impossibility. The impossibility or unintelligibility of the intersexed body means that the norm imposes surgical adaptation to become an intelligible body: a man or a woman, both anatomically as well as socially adapted to conform to prevailing understandings of gendered being.¹¹ To Butler,

intersexuality is not a biological or medical problem, but rather a social problem that is violently policed.

So with normative violence Butler points to the violence of the norm, i.e. it may or may not be physical violence, it may or may not lead to physical injury. Normative violence refers to violence by restriction, and may result in actual physical violence. Normalisation not only justifies such violence, but turns the blame for such violence upon its victim. Those who experience violence in response to their own transgression have provoked it, turning the vulnerability, and thus putative protection against violence, on its head. The perpetrator becomes the victim, the victim the perpetrator. How violence against LGBT people is justified, or how wife-battering or rape of women is often justified, mirrors such an argument whereby violence becomes socially justified, and thus invisible, against the normative framework in which society is immersed. The imposed boundaries of being that provide the parameters of personhood ‘make persons according to abstract norms that at once condition and exceed the lives they make and break’.¹² These boundaries of being make certain lives unlivable in specific given social environments – e.g. gay lives, divorced lives, intersexed lives or any other lives that transgress the norms set in the socio-political context in which one happens to be born. Only a few are able to turn transgression into subversion, in open resistance to imposed norms, putting one’s life at stake in order to subvert those norms. So, considering all this, when is life livable?

In her work on the post 9/11 world, Butler uses the same concepts – normative violence, subversion, livable life – to analyze public grief, a line of thought she started in *Undoing Gender*. Her point about the grievability of life is that by examining our ceremonies of public grief, who is grieved and who is not, we can identify who is seen as included and who is not, who is deserving of a ‘lived’ life. This implies that those who are not grieved have not lived a life that fits the normative framework. Taking this a step further, Butler

asserts that those who are not grieved are subject to culturally viable notions of the human:¹³ they do not deserve to be grieved, nor is grief possible, simply because they are non-existent as full human beings in a particular cultural context. Only full human beings can be grieved. As Moya Lloyd emphasizes, this is an active process of dehumanization, which serves political purposes.¹⁴ In *Undoing Gender*, Butler uses the example of the contrast in the second Gulf War between the lives of the thousands of killed Iraqis versus the high visibility of public grief over American lives. The second example she uses are AIDS victims in Africa; they are not grieved as full, individual human beings. If anything, they are recognised as a mass of unaccounted-for poor and worthless beings summarized in statistics. Many other examples exist of course: women and children trafficked and killed in the sex industry, immigrants dying in containers, migrant labourers anywhere, organ ‘donors’ in remote and poor areas of the world, and so on.

The questions Butler poses in *Precarious Life* are ‘Whose lives count as lives? Who counts as human? What *makes for a grievable life*?’¹⁵ Her starting point is the personal experience of mourning, the realization of our own embodiment through the attachment to others – and the possibility of loss. Our physical vulnerability is constituted in ‘our being socially constituted bodies, attached to others, at risk of losing those attachments, exposed to others, at risk of violence by virtue of that exposure’.¹⁶ Butler argues that personal loss may feel privatizing, ‘that it returns us to a solitary situation’ and is often seen as depoliticizing, but actually shows us the complex constitution of political community, of the ‘we’ in which we live our lives. Seen in such a way, grief – that is, public grief – is a political act and actively shows patterns of inclusion and exclusion, hence the question: what makes life grievable? Public grief, and the denial of grief, are then political acts which purposefully produce and reproduce an ‘us’ and ‘them’. Butler fails to mention, possibly because it is irrelevant to her argument, that private grief, either at an individual, family or community

level, is still grief and being grieved, and that such 'private' forms of grief have their own political meaning in any particular setting. However, for the sake of the argument that grief serves to recognize lived lives in a post 9/11 world, grief is analysed from the point of view of the powerful: the powerful determine whom to grieve and whom to deny grief to, thereby showing the world whom they perceive as important, i.e. US soldiers yes, Iraqi civilians no. Thus hegemonic orders and hierarchies can be analysed through the politics of public grief as a 'mechanism of power through which life is reproduced'.¹⁷

By asking which lives are publicly grieved, Butler asks us to look at which lives are not grieved. She asks us to make visible the dehumanizing effect of othering which makes violence possible, and life ungrievable. Butler seeks to highlight the gross injustice of the violence perpetrated in the name of conceptions of humanity that are not only exclusive, but that seem to legitimize a continuous violence upon certain groups of people. This continuity of violence, Butler suggests, is the result of a perception of bodies that will not die – an endless battle against a perceived other. The ungrievable life is not necessarily dead, but is undone, is made 'unreal'.¹⁸ This means that violence 'fails to injure', and that such lives must be negated again and again. The rhetoric that portrays the war on terror as an unending war does just that: it pronounces the 'infinity of its enemy'.¹⁹ In this context, the result is a generalized racism that is rationalized through a discourse of threat and self-defense: the dehumanization of all lives that vaguely look Arab and Muslim.

State of Emergency, State of Exception

In discussing the so-called Global War on Terror, Butler asks how power is used to make possible excesses such as those perpetrated in Guatànamo Bay.²⁰ She uses Foucault and Giorgio Agamben to discuss the suspension of law and the use and abuse of sovereignty in the creation of an infinite enemy. In her essay 'Indefinite Detention',²¹ she discusses Foucault's understanding of governmentality in which political power manages and regulates

populations. Foucault saw governmentality as characteristically late modern, in that it was clearly distinct from earlier understandings of state power, i.e. sovereignty. Butler points out that sovereignty has come back, emphasizing that it has not replaced governmentality, but that 'sovereignty, under emergency conditions in which the rule of law is suspended, [re-emerged] in the context of governmentality with the vengeance of an anachronism that refuses to die'.²² Writing in the context of the discussion about Guantánamo Bay, the concentration of power in the executive branch of US government suspended the separation of powers and vested judiciary power in the President – suggesting a 'return' to the times when a monarch had sovereign power over its subjects. Yet, Butler asserts, decision-making about who gets a trial and who will be detained indefinitely lies with 'managerial officials', suggesting that they do so within a field of governmentality. Modern governmentality is bound up with contemporary sovereignty in the officials who rule via delegated power, deciding over life and death in a paralegal setting. Agamben notes that sovereignty, understood as an extra-legal authority, establishes conditions for the exceptional suspension of law, i.e. the sovereign has the power to grant exceptional status. In doing so, the state creates a 'para legal universe that goes by the name of law'.²³ This does not mean that the bureaucrats who exercise power over life and death do so in a context of lawlessness, but that they operate on the basis of an *exception to the law*. Such a construction of a state of emergency, Butler suggests, makes all life vulnerable to be assigned exceptional status, i.e. to be stripped of rights in an indefinite state of emergency. This vulnerability we have in relation to others is what Butler calls the 'precarity' of life.

It is sovereignty that makes possible the state of emergency, and the suspension of law. As Butler asserts, 'the law is suspended in the name of the "sovereignty" of the nation where "sovereignty" denotes the task of any state to preserve and protect its own territoriality'.²⁴ Of course, the notion of nation and territory helps to set the parameters for

exclusion, for defining the other. The process of imagining the nation shows that the 'other' can be internal and that a nation does not necessarily include all who live in its territory. Nevertheless, sovereign power does cover territory, and the suspension of law within its territory means that those who are not perceived as forming part of the nation enter a freefall, are suspended themselves, become vulnerable to the visions of the infinite enemy, in other words, they become a state of exception.

Butler calls upon Agamben to reflect on the meaning of the infinite enemy. According to Agamben, the state that invokes its sovereign power to declare the exception to the law, or the emergency, strips certain lives from their 'ontological status as subjects'.²⁵ Agamben distinguishes between the political being and bare life. The political being, or *bios*, is a life valued with rights, a citizen. Bare life, or *zoë*, consists of life, but not rights. It is life devoid of value, life that does not deserve to live. It is life as biological minimum.²⁶ Bare life is the exception, a situation where law does not rule or protect. Butler is interested in bare life in the context of the suspension of law in cases that fit the vision of the infinite enemy according to a sovereign state, in this case 'animated by an aggressive nostalgia that seeks to do away with the separation of powers'.²⁷ Bare life refers to those kept in indefinite detention: it is life, but ungrievable, unreal, disposable in the political context as perceived by the sovereign power in a state of emergency.

The notion of bare life is powerful as it invokes processes of dehumanization and the possibility of horrendous violence perpetrated upon bodies. However, bare life is a philosophical notion that describes a state of ontological suspension; it does not allow for subtleties that may keep people at the margins of the *polis*, in the permanent uncertainty of becoming subject to such extreme exception. Agamben himself, in his discussion of crimes against humanity in general, and the holocaust in particular, urges that 'instead of asking the hypocritical question of how crimes of such atrocity could be committed against humans we

must investigate carefully the juridical procedures and deployments of power by which human beings could be so completely deprived of their rights and prerogatives that no act committed against them could appear any longer as a crime'.²⁸ A careful questioning of the normative truths that guide and restrict life help visibilize violence that is otherwise tolerated, normalized, and in some cases, legitimized. This is a powerful approach in analysing forms of violence and dispossession in the everyday, such as gender-based violence, as well as the analysis of the mechanisms of institutional violence related to vectors of inequality such as race, class, sexuality, religion, age, nationality, and indeed gender.

Considering this analysis of the power of governance and normativity in subject formation, Butler is concerned with the possibility of agency. In *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2005), she discusses the opacity of the self, given our emergence as related to the other. Does this opacity, or the limits of self-knowledge, not make it impossible to be a responsible and accountable human being? Underlying questions here seem to be what is accountability? and what is punishment for one's actions? if one's actions cannot be fully accounted for. *Giving an Account of Oneself* is an attempt at understanding the capacity for agency in a world that, according to Adorno, depends on self-identity versus universalism. Butler interrogates the nature of agency and how agency is shaped by the normative framework in which we live (i.e. society) and the personal relations we have (i.e., with the 'other'). How can we become people of good judgement, or, as she formulated it in her Adorno Prize lecture, how 'can one lead a good life in a bad life?'²⁹ Considering the prevailing normative and institutional restrictions upon being, 'the flourishing of diverse people is simply impossible and many are denied the possibility of a good life',³⁰ but that, however precarious, does not undo agency. To be an accountable human being, or, to exercise a 'politics of a good life', is then, in Kearns's words, about 'biopolitics, nonviolence, and the preconditions of mutual flourishing'.³¹

In her book *Parting Ways. Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism*, Butler expresses the ideals of nonviolence and mutual flourishing in a carefully argued critique of Zionism and the politics of Israel. Butler draws on Arab intellectuals (e.g. Edward Said and Mahmood Darwish) and also on Jewish intellectuals (e.g. Benjamin, Arendt and two Israeli post-Zionist intellectuals, Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin and Yehuda Shenhav), in order to develop a sophisticated argument against a political, philosophical or religious adherence to Zionism, because it is Israel's ethno-nationalist Zionism that justifies and promotes state violence against Palestinians. Butler's 'geopolitics of identity'³² draws heavily on her earlier ideas about subject formation in relation to 'others', but from a perspective that makes one's identity imaginable, possible, mouldable. She advocates binationality, or postnationality, whereby being part of a nation-state is inherently beyond the nation-state. Citizenship should be beyond religion, race, ethnicity or any identity markers that separate and prevent solidarity: both Palestinians and Jews in Israel should be able to feel Jewish, or Palestinian, as well as part of a compound identity that includes the 'other' and her rights and responsibilities. The only way to overcome the ethno-nationalist violence that persists in and dominates over Israel/Palestine is for each party to recognize the other as worthily human and to incorporate that worthy 'other' into one's own identity. The reliance on Jewish ethics and Jewish intellectuals to make this argument allows her to foreground the objection that the historical and religious/ethnic nature of identity is already given and therefore justifies the ethnonationalist separation from the 'other' –culturally and physically. Butler argues that co-habitation, binationality and diasporic identity are at the heart of Jewish ethics, and hence ultimately this disqualifies Zionism as in any way central to Jewish identity.

Parting Ways is very much a critique of the criticism that anti-Zionism equals anti-Semitism – or Jewish self-hatred. But some progressive critics also reject Butler's objectives: Chaim Gans³³ and Miro Daniel Garasic,³⁴ in similar vein, argue that Butler's understanding

of Zionism is too limited, and that her end-goal precludes her theoretical investigation, hence the activist argument informs the philosophy, instead of the other way around. This, then, leads to unattainable or unrealistic proposals with regard to a binational Israeli/Palestine future. However, Butler does consider her own proposals somewhat utopian, and considers this also a necessary political counterpoint against prevailing Zionism:

Although it is commonly said that a one-state solution and an ideal of binationalism are impractical goals ... it is equally true that a world in which no one held out for a one-state solution and no one thought anymore about binationalism would be a radically impoverished world. I take it that we might say the same about pacifism. It might be discredited as lacking all Realpolitik, but would any of us want to live in a world in which pacifists no longer existed? What kind of world that would be?³⁵

Indeed, whether particular utopian outcomes are attainable or not, Butler's politics of nonviolence demands a continuous questioning and unsettling of the everyday commonsense that feeds into a violent social and political world of precarious living. And such questioning of who we are and what we do – i.e. not only giving an account of oneself, but actively striving for a socially just world, informs her political activism.

Confronting Violence in the World

Considering the above there should be no doubt about Butler's contemporary relevance, be that for thinking about gender and sexuality, subject formation, (state) violence, or contemporary modes of resistance. Her contributions to the fields of critical social and political theory are immense. But her politics is not only theoretical; her theories undoubtedly aim to unsettle the way we tend to see the world, and thereby help to transform violent or restrictive social-political configurations of power. Butler's understanding of subject formation as an inherently interdependent social process that is highly influenced by

prevailing normative frameworks constitutes both the groundwork for understanding how norms restrict what we can be, as well as for understanding how we can formulate agency and hence resistance. If violence itself is an important part of how and what we become, then our response to violence is potentially the source of change. Non-violence, Butler asserts, is not necessarily useful or possible as a principle in all circumstances, but must be identified and considered each and every time that 'non-violence makes a claim on us'.³⁶ It is our ability to challenge normative frameworks that is subversive; responding with violence to violence will entrench violence as norm; while it is the aggression in ourselves which demands the ethical necessity of non-violence. Hence non-violence is a struggle against normative or normalized structural or contingent violence, as well as a struggle against the rage within.

Butler is increasingly outspoken about the politics of the world we live in, and actively opposes the commonsense of war and oppression that has emerged after 9/11. Again, these positions are not only theoretical; her critique of Israel's Zionist politics has concrete consequences, generates very real opposition, causes her to be barred from public lectures, as well as to withdraw from them. According to Kearns, she is known for taking a stand, supporting activist groups, and supporting others in developing particular standpoints.³⁷ He tells how Butler 'has been exemplary in her support of others working out how to respond to' the calls for boycotts of academic institutions in Israel that do not explicitly support an end to the occupation, advising Slavoj Žižek to go and talk at a film festival, but as a participant rather than as a funded invitee, and Sarah Schulman in connection with her intent to talk about LGBT studies at Tel Aviv University advising her to talk to grassroots activists and Palestinian communities instead of to speak formally at the university. Butler's advice was 'to use the academic boycott [as an] an education tool'.³⁸

At the heart of Butler's activism lies the idea of solidarity, as opposed to, or contrasted with, activism that is based on identity. Butler's adherence to solidarity reaches back to her understanding of Jewish ethics, as a commitment to social justice and ethical living in recognition of the 'other', but also to her analysis of how our vulnerability is grounded in mutual precarity. For Butler, the livability of life is not a medical or even a biological issue, but a social and political one: our physical vulnerability is ultimately conditioned by social and political exposure, and that means that life needs to be protected against ever-looming precariousness. It is that interdependency, as Butler states, that 'establishes our vulnerability to social forms of deprivation'.³⁹ Thus a Leftist politics of solidarity should start by recognizing our individual precarity as a shared problem, even if it is clear that not all are equally exposed to such precarity.⁴⁰ Butler insists that precarity is politically relevant and should be translated into policy: 'Policy needs to understand precariousness as a shared condition, and precarity as the politically induced condition that would deny equal exposure through the radically unequal distribution of wealth and the differential ways of exposing certain populations racially and nationally conceptualized, to greater violence.'⁴¹ Of course, the practice of a 'normative commitment to equality ... to minimize precariousness in egalitarian ways',⁴² would need to be preceded by a political understanding of how policy – and geopolitics – actively sustain unequal exposure to precarity. And this, then, is part of Butler's political activism: she has spoken at several 'Occupy' encampments and 'Slut Walk' events, allying herself to contemporary social movements fighting against hegemonic neoliberal, sexists and racist logics.

Butler understands neoliberal governance as both a global economic system that exposes the majority of the vulnerable to the capital-accumulating few, as well as shaping modes of rationality, morality and subject formation that make precarity seemingly legitimate, and even the only way forward. The common sense of neoliberal economic

practice rises far beyond economics: it undermines and reshapes democratic relationships.⁴³ Such a Foucaultian understanding of contemporary neoliberal governance is essential for our understanding of the relation between feminism, contemporary gender relations and neoliberalism, and has been debated widely.⁴⁴ But Butler is not known for her analysis of neoliberal governance (her partner Wendy Brown is, of course). Nevertheless, the debate between Nancy Fraser and Butler in the late 1990s in the journal *Social Text* about the economic/cultural distinction was important in understanding feminist forms of resistance to neoliberalism.⁴⁵ Fraser differentiates between the economic and cultural spheres in order to suggest ways to overcome the harm that contemporary neoliberalism causes – redistribution has to be accompanied by a politics of recognition in order to improve well-being and reduce vulnerability and exploitation. Butler, in turn, finds that re-asserting the economic/cultural distinction has a political function that works to dismiss political claims as ‘merely cultural’. What is at stake here, ultimately, is the question of how the neoliberal logic has become internalised by the very agents of resistance we tend to look for in order to subvert the logic: are contemporary feminists indeed agents of capitalism, as Fraser recently asserted?⁴⁶ Now Butler never has been much of a mainstream feminist, actively opposing the idea that there is a singular identity on which to base such activism, so her interpretation of resistance to the mainstream – neoliberal and/or feminist – will perhaps always be troubling.

In a series of conversations with Athena Athanasiou published in 2013, Butler elaborates on her understandings of precarity, dispossession and resistance. The conversations intend to engage with the concrete violence of contemporary forms of dispossession and vulnerability from a leftist-queer-feminist perspective, engaging with the logics of how the contemporary geopolitics of dispossession within the neoliberal order – ‘accumulation by dispossession’, as David Harvey calls such logic⁴⁷ – are what Butler has analysed as moralized forms of violence. In *Precarious Life* and *Frames of War*, Butler

interrogates the ways in which war is framed using moralistic arguments around the liberation of others, who are, simultaneously, discarded as human beings; the conversations with Athanasiou focus on the one hand on the analysis of dispossession without resorting to counterarguments around what is lost, and on the other hand, they are intended to reflect on contemporary protest. In these protests⁴⁸ Butler sees the survival of democracy and collective action in the face of overwhelming dispossession and injustice as loosely-defined social movements occupying public space. This collective voicing of discontent with the powers that be may be an attractive vision of global crowds defending ‘our collective precarity and persistence in the making of equality and the many-voiced and unvoiced ways of refusing to become disposable’.⁴⁹ Alternatively, such an interpretation reflects Butler’s tendency to utopian visions in relation to the violence of the political, perhaps not entirely realistic, but certainly inviting us to the struggle.

Further Reading

- Judith Butler, 1990. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York & London, Routledge.
- _____. 2004. *Precarious Life: Powers of Violence and Mourning*. London & New York, Verso.
- _____. 2004. *Undoing Gender*. New York & London: Routledge.
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- Moya Lloyd, *Judith Butler. From Norms to Politics*. Polity Press, 2007.
- Samuel A. Chambers and Terrell Carver, *Judith Butler and Political Theory. Troubling Politics*. Routledge 2008.
- Birgit Schippers, *The Political Philosophy of Judith Butler*. Routledge, 2014.

¹ Butler, ‘As a Jew, I was taught it was ethically imperative to speak up’, quoted in Aloni Udi, *Haaretz*, 24 February 2010, retrieved 13 May 2014.

² Moya Lloyd, *Judith Butler. From Norms to Politics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007).

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- ¹⁰ Butler, *Undoing Gender*, p. 58.
- ¹¹ Butler, *Undoing Gender*, pp. 59-65.
- ¹² Butler, *Undoing Gender*, p. 56.
- ¹³ Butler, *Undoing Gender*, p. 24.
- ¹⁴ Lloyd, *Judith Butler*. p. 95.
- ¹⁵ Judith Butler, *Precarious Life. The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London and New York: Verso), p. 20 (emphasis in original).
- ¹⁶ Butler, *Precarious Life*, p. 20.
- ¹⁷ Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (London and New York: Verso, 2009), p. 1.
- ¹⁸ Butler, *Undoing Gender*, p. 33.
- ¹⁹ Butler, *Undoing Gender*, p. 34.
- ²⁰ This is based on her essay 'Indefinite Detention' in *Precarious Life*, pp. 50-100. In *Frames of War* Butler discusses the meaning of the abuses at Abu Ghraib and their visuality.

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- ²² Butler, 'Indefinite Detention', p. 54.
- ²³ Butler, 'Indefinite Detention', p. 61.
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- ²⁵ Butler, 'Indefinite Detention', p. 67.
- ²⁶ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998).
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- ²⁹ Judith Butler, 'Can one lead a good life in a bad life?' Adorno Prize Lecture, *Radical Philosophy* 76 (2012), pp. 9-18, cited in Kearns, 'Butler Affair', p. 191.
- ³⁰ Kearns, 'Butler Affair', p. 191.
- ³¹ Kearns, 'Butler Affair', p.192.
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⁴¹ Butler, *Frames of War*, p. 28.

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⁴⁴ Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France 1978-79* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008). Foucault's neoliberalism as governance has found resonance in many left-leaning analyses of contemporary economic and political regimes, as, for example, in Wendy Brown, 'Neoliberalism and the End of Liberal Democracy', *Theory & Event* 7(1) 2003 [on-line only]; and in Aihwa Ong, *Neoliberalism as Exception. Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).

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⁴⁶ Nancy Fraser, 'How feminism became capitalism's handmaiden – and how to reclaim it'. *Guardian*, 14 October 2013.
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⁴⁷ David Harvey, *The New Imperialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

⁴⁸ Both Butler and Athanasiou tend to group all protest of the last five years or so together under the banner of ‘new protest’, from the revolutions that started in Tunisia to ‘Occupy Wall Street’ and the London riots of summer 2011.

⁴⁹ Butler, *Dispossession*, p. 197.